

## Economic Representations in an American Region:

### What's at stake in Appalachia?

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Now, as in the past, Appalachian economies have been the object of politically intense representational struggles. Appalachia was first “discovered,” i.e., represented as, a coherent region and homogeneous culture, in the last third of the nineteenth century amid the rapid growth of Appalachian railroad building, timber extraction, and coal mining (Shapiro, 1978). Alongside mine operators, land agents, lawyers, and engineers, novelists, home missionaries, educators, and social workers descended upon and narrated the region. Despite rapid industrialization of the countryside, what most fascinated these diverse agents of economic and cultural intervention was Appalachia's imagined isolation and poverty that constituted a rural zone of backwardness, authenticating, by its exceptionalism, a hegemonic imaginary of American urban and industrial progress.

It was in this context as early as 1873, that Appalachia was pictured as “a strange land and a peculiar people” (Harney, 1873), a discursive figure that functioned as a constitutive outside for the signifiers of American greatness. And, like all the West's Others, this indigenous Other was characterized in both positive and negative terms (Said, 1979). “Discourses of uplift,” addressed to Northern benefactors of mountain school builders and social workers, described mountain people as, in the words of the president of one of the region's colleges, “not so much a degraded population as a [worthy] population not yet graded up,” while “discourses of displacement,” articulated by developers, portrayed the region's population as dangerous. The latter discourse called

for the expropriation of Appalachia's vast timber and mineral resources, the region's numerical domination by outsiders, and for its "wild, barbaric blood" to be diluted by emigration (Billings and Blee, 1996).

Appalachia was rediscovered in the 1930s and again in the 1960s (Batteau, 1900). During the Great Depression, several representations competed for authority. When national policy was focused on under-consumption, the first federally sponsored survey of Appalachia described the region as the largest zone of subsistence-oriented, non-commercial—and hence "unproductive"—agriculture in the United States (U.S.D.A., 1935). It urged the emigration of Appalachia's "under-employed" rural population at the same time that new disciplinary regimes of economic development such as the Tennessee Valley Authority were established. TVA flooded mountain farms, as well as whole communities, to provide cheap power for southern economic development and forced numerous mountain farmers into the paid work force (McDonald and Muldowny, 1982). It was also during this time of acute national crisis that the iconic image of the lazy "hillbilly" was standardized in national cartoons (Harkins, forthcoming). This depiction of the hillbilly's reputed disregard for economic success would, again, express the mixture of dread and envy that representations of America's Others usually convey.

Other Depression era reformers advanced alternative representations. Women active in the settlement house movement, for instance, created the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild to preserve their preferred versions of "mountain culture" and to provide economic relief by organizing and marketing homemade women's products. The Guild rationalized craft production by supplying standardized materials and design patterns (sometimes of European origin) for commodities that, despite their contrived

nature, were marketed as authentic mountain crafts. This approach was opposed by other reformers in the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor who attempted to define Appalachia's women artisans as exploited, full-time wage laborers rather than part-time domestic workers and to regulate their wages and working conditions (Becker, 1998).

Finally, some members of the American Left represented Appalachia during the Depression as a symbol of imminent proletarian revolution. Inspired by the mass insurgency of ten thousand armed coal miners who had marched from Charleston, West Virginia in the 1920s to overthrow the gun thug-dominated government of Logan County, and by the communist-led strike of Harlan County, Kentucky miners in the 1930s, they pictured Appalachia as a zone of spontaneous class militancy. Most notably, novelist Theodore Dreiser and his National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners took Kentucky mountain folk-singer Aunt Molly Jackson to New York City to represent in song Appalachian miners' plight and determination (National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, 1970 [1932]; also Romalis, 1999).

By the 1960s, the heroic era of class conflict in Appalachia seemingly had passed as mechanization of the coal industry resulted in extensive deindustrialization. Mechanization, along with the inability of agriculture to sustain a large population, led to massive outmigration from Central Appalachia as well as to media representations of the region as a zone of persistent poverty. Sociologists portrayed Appalachia as a region-wide culture of poverty (Ball, 1968) while mainstream economists—blind to the very factors that had led to crisis—described Appalachia as an empty economic space that lacked integration with the wider economy. A new regime of economic development, the

Appalachian Regional Commission, promised to integrate Appalachia, now represented as “a region apart,” into the national “free-enterprise orbit” by investing in infrastructure (roads, sewers, and industrial parks), urban growth centers, and training (Whisnant, 1980). Cultural modernization theory in sociology thus offered complementary representations to those of neo-classical regional development economists (Walls, 1976).

Scholars and activists in the region in the 1970s responded critically to these representations of Appalachian deficiency by asserting that the region’s problems could better be understood in terms of economic exploitation and political domination than in terms of cultural traditionalism and economic isolation. In shifting attention from culture to coal, however, most of them focused on the impacts of absentee ownership on communities rather than on class relations in mining (see Lewis, Johnson, and Askins, 1978) . Influenced by Latin American dependency theory as well as representations of racial ghettos as “internal colonies,” they reshaped the discourse on Appalachia by the use of metaphor and metonymy. The metaphor of Appalachia as an internal colony soon began to displace the culture of poverty in discussions of regional economics, at least locally in Appalachian academic and activist circles, and coal came to symbolize the whole of Appalachia (see Lewis, 1970).

Neo-Marxists within the emerging Appalachian studies movement were critical of the representation of Appalachia as an internal colony (Southern Mountain Research Collective, 1983-84). While agreeing that the coal industry should be the focus of analysis, they pointed out that regions do not exploit regions; rather, classes exploit classes. The process of capital accumulation was defined as the appropriate object of study, not the region itself. The latter was viewed simply as “context” (Simon, 1983-84).

The representation of regions as arenas of class exploitation, however, emptied Appalachia of much of its content and reduced it to an abstraction, an empty space for the forces of capitalist accumulation and resistance to it. While Marxists produced important studies of the labor process in coal mining, class formation, and the history of union struggles (especially Banks, 1980a and 1980b), representations of Appalachia as overflowing with capitalism were in some ways simply the reversal of neo-classical economic development theory's representation of Appalachia as an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the magic of the market. Arguably, the failure of many Marxists to represent place adequately in relation to history, i.e., as something more than "context," may explain why, despite obvious flaws, representations of Appalachia as a colony better captured the imagination of the region's scholars and activists alike. Books like Ron Eller's (1982), *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, John Gaventa's (1980) *Power and Powerlessness*, and David Whisnant's (1981) *Modernizing the Mountaineer* narrated a tragic struggle between insiders and outsiders in Appalachia that helped to fuel regional activism throughout the 1980s. For example, a large, multi-state participatory research project documented land ownership and taxation patterns throughout the region (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, 1983) gave rise to important and still enduring citizen reform movements (Fisher, 1993, 1999; Tice and Billings, 1991.)

Battles over economic representations of Appalachia are no less important today. About 150 of the 407 counties served by the Appalachian Regional Commission are officially portrayed as "economically distressed" and one fourth of the region's population is defined as impoverished by federal standards. Distress is especially acute in Appalachian Kentucky where, in 1990, sixteen of the twenty poorest ARC counties were

located, including nine of the top ten. Indeed, 10% of the poorest counties in the United States were in Kentucky that year. Here, as across Appalachia, residents and citizen organizations are waging “wars of position” in civil society to win support for counter-hegemonic representations of the Appalachian economy against developers, industry officials, and state agencies.

Space permits mention of only a few examples. In Kentucky, some agencies in that state’s economic development regime remain committed to the old strategy of branch plant industrial recruitment but are opposed by the Democracy Resource Center, a member of the Kentucky Economic Justice Alliance, which has criticized the more than \$3 billion dollars in grants and incentives awarded to non-local corporations for locating plants in the state while creating relatively few jobs (Bailey and Natter, 2000). Besides chasing smoke-stacks and chip mills, other state agencies are trying to better Kentucky’s position in the so-called “New Economy” by stressing “flexible” production, deregulation, informational and bio-technology development, and risky employment in the name of “global competitiveness.” Accordingly, Appalachia is represented on one federal government website as being one of America’s “economic flatliners” that is among the “places left behind in rural America” ([www.hud.gov/library...shelf18/pressrel/leftbehind/nowflat](http://www.hud.gov/library...shelf18/pressrel/leftbehind/nowflat)). But such thinking is challenged by the Community Farm Alliance which has developed a “Green Plan” for Kentucky that would use tobacco settlement money to preserve “family scale farming” while “protecting the environment and strengthening rural community life” in opposition to “policies that promote a global industrialized agricultural economy” ([www.communityfarmalliance.com](http://www.communityfarmalliance.com)). On a much smaller scale, the Mountain Tradition Cooperative in Leslie County, Kentucky is trying

to represent “wildcrafting” (environmentally sensitive herb collecting, processing, and marketing) as a sustainable alternative to coal and timber extraction (anon, 1998).

Still other representations vie for attention in Appalachian communities outside of Kentucky. In Ivanhoe, Virginia, citizens fought to substitute communal social service provisioning for industrial recruitment in meeting locally defined needs (Hinsdale, Lewis, and Waller, 1995) while the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet), a community economic development organization serving Appalachian Ohio, has applied models derived from worker cooperatives in the Mondragon region of Spain and the networked, niche-based firms of Modena and Bologna, Italy to provide venture loans, training, support, and incubator facilities for about 200 businesses, many of them linked in the food sector ([www.acenetworks.org](http://www.acenetworks.org)). Finally, in an approach that is consistent with the recent emphasis placed on the centrality of current and past forms of non-capitalist, multiple-livelihood strategies in Appalachia by ethnographers and sociologists, (Halperin 1990; Billings and Blee, 2000), the Coalition for Jobs and the Environment provides support and training for the informal “patchworking” of income sources among residents in adjacent counties in Appalachian Virginia and Tennessee, including bartering (Coalition for Jobs and the Environment, 2000; also Flaccavento, 1997). In each of these efforts and many more across the region, the politics of representation play key roles in discursive struggles to define and intervene in Appalachian economies.

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